

# You Never Know Where a Classified Ad May Take You

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By Gilbert Diaz-Santos

Classified ads possibly rate among the most widely read items in newspapers and magazines. By their diversity, they have the power of attracting individuals from every walk of life. One can find such a variety of information in them ranging from advertising a position at a prestigious institution to the wholesaling of exotic Havana cigars. In foreign language teaching, classified ads provide authentic materials to practice successfully the universally useful study skill of scanning for specific information.

As an ESP instructor in the mathematical sciences, I had never imagined myself dealing with such materials until I found a classified ad column in the *Journal of the American Mathematical Society*. My first intention was to use the page as a scanning exercise and to introduce the names of different fields within mathematics as new vocabulary items. But a second glance made me realize that the ad also contained terms from the academic world-tenures, fellowships, degrees, categories of professors, AA/EOE and others. Further it listed the documents required to apply for teaching and research positions, and it showed different address formats. Why not use the ad to teach these too?

I first divided the class into teams of 2-3 students and encouraged them to look up a number of specific details such as:

- Positions/career opportunities available in various fields of mathematics.
- Special requirements (citizenship, experience, qualifications) for the positions advertised.
- Documents demanded by the different hiring committees.
- Conditions under which interviews would take place.

Answers to questions which were not immediately observable on the page were also included. This would not be a useless search as it would give an overview of the whole text and thus help pupils find other pieces of information requested further on. To keep up the competitive spirit during the activity, I wrote on the blackboard the times it took each team to find the answer to every question, data used later to evaluate the overall conception and effectiveness of the exercise.

When the search was over and all the answers were checked, I then taught those aspects originally planned. As a follow-up activity, pupils were asked to write a letter of application to one of the institutions whose announcement matched their interest as future mathematicians. However, the best was yet to come.

The usual after-class reflection gave me new ideas for expanding what I had just started with the ad. In the next class, I announced that everybody was to get ready for a real job interview and for

a presentation "at the AMS meeting to be held in San Francisco." As the course was just starting, several tasks that I would involve my pupils in could be scheduled for the coming weeks:

- Writing the necessary documents to apply for the positions advertised.
- Writing a letter of reference for two other colleagues in the classroom.
- Preparing a short essay in which they discussed a specialty-related issue or outlined a research proposal, which also implied writing a 100 word abstract "to be included in the conference program."

So, the classified ad provided an underlining theme for a number of activities which had not been conceived of at the beginning of the semester. These activities would, in one way or another, change substantially the existing syllabus for they also implied a serious shift in the hierarchy of language skills to be taught. Since the new assignments implied a lot of writing, some entries required more than one draft. The least trained skill in our course became the one which received attention. Needless to say, it meant much more work for me as I had to play the part of the hiring committees and, therefore, had to answer all the letters!

Another significant change in the syllabus had to do with reincorporating dialogues. They used to be the typical linguistic material during the first stage of our 3 semester EFL program, but they had been totally replaced by specialists texts as we reached the intermediate and advanced stages. For this, I used two passages from the Spectrum series (lessons 12 and 2 in books 2 and 3 respectively) which dealt with job interviews, and some recordings and maps from an issue of the *English Teaching Forum* (January 1990) which helped me create the whole atmosphere of the trip to San Francisco and motivate my students to further develop their potential for conversational skills.

During the last week of the course, the imitation AMS meeting was organized and two important sessions took place: (1) the job interview in which the potential employers met their applicants and, (2) the presentation at a lecture hall of the research proposal which had been written for the application process. These individual presentations also constituted the oral examination for the course. But my pupils were so amused by the setting that they forgot they were being tested. In short, our San Francisco meeting was more than an amazing performance by my students. It was also two hours of great fun.

It appears clearly enough how a single and perhaps irrelevant exercise may start a sort of chain reaction which might inevitably affect one's further classroom activity. In this case, a classified ad, initially intended for practicing the skill of scanning, set in motion a semester-long simulation around which a variety of tasks and an intense language practice hinged. If I were to generalize the direct implications this experience brought about for my teaching, I would say that:

- It created a lot of expectations and triggered students' interest and motivation to carry out a number of assignments they might not have completed so willingly under the usual circumstances;
- The fact that students had to write several drafts of most assignments made them experience writing as a process, an invaluable feedback for self-evaluation;

- The whole process of application/ job interview yielded an increase in language intake/output conveyed in different formats which in turn implied a considerable use of general, subtechnical, and technical vocabulary;
- There was an unquestionable change of attitude on the part of the learners since this language practice stressed productive over receptive skills, and speaking and writing acquired a new meaning since they were aimed to achieve more purposeful communicative interactions or transactions;
- The teaching setting eliminated a lot of constraints and allowed pupils to use language more authentically.

I never imagined how far a classified ad might take me. With this one, I learned an unforgettable lesson on the potential of authentic materials as well as on the unpredictability and joy of language teaching.

**Gilbert Diaz-Santos** is an EFL teacher at the Faculty of Mathematics and Cybernetics of the University of Cuba.

## References

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